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Khaled_Balkin

Variant Readings: Why Did Uthman Take the Risk?

One of the most widely accepted contemporary scholarly explanations for Uthman's decision to burn the *maṣāḥif* held by certain Companions is that he sought to unify his empire with a single text, thereby consolidating his own authority. Proponents of this view note that variant readings at that time were not necessarily major, yet Uthman recognized that unifying the text would centralize control. Others, however, argue that the real threat lay not in the existing variations themselves, but in the possibility that these differences could expand over time, potentially leading to significant religious and political divisions. In that sense, the decision was not a response to an immediate crisis so much as a preemptive step.

Yet this notion of "potential expansion" assumes that the Quran was primarily transmitted orally at the time. If the text was already committed to writing, it stands to reason that Muslims had written references to prevent such expansion. This is almost self-evident: if the Quran had not been written down in maṣāḥif at the time, what exactly did Uthman burn?

However, this political explanation overlooks the political reality itself: Uthman's position was highly precarious, and he had no desire to exacerbate an already tense situation, especially given the accusations of financial and political corruption leveled against him. If the Iraqis were on the verge of fighting the Syrians over differences in recitation, and even accusing them of unbelief, then Uthman would have been well aware that by burning certain readings, he was essentially doing away with what, from the perspective of some Muslims, was **the correct and divinely sanctioned version of revelation.** If they deemed one another disbelievers over these readings, (1)(2)(3)(4) they would also deem Uthman himself a disbeliever if **he burned the version of revelation they considered authentic.** So why would Uthman take the risk of burning the codices if they did not pose a theological or political danger, given that he was already lacking legitimacy and in a dire situation that could not tolerate further public anger, resentment, or accusations of unbelief?

As for the religious explanation — namely, that Uthman wanted to preserve God's word in a unified form, free from discord and disputation, and thus avert the potential conflict among Muslims over the Quran — it glosses over the fact that these differences in reading were sanctioned by a divine concession (the permission to recite according to seven *aḥruf*). This explanation effectively portrays Uthman as correcting an error made by God Himself, which is incompatible with the notion that Uthman's motivation was strictly religious.

Sources:

1. Suwayd ibn Ghafalah heard Ali say: "I have been informed that some people say: My recitation is better than yours. This is on the verge of being unbelief."

«سويد بن غفلة سمع علي بن أبي طالب يقول: بلغني أن بعضهم يقول: إن قراءتي خير من قراءتك، وهذا يكاد أن يكون كفرا»

Ibn Abi Dawud, *Al-Masahif* (Cairo, 2000), 96.

2. Bukayr: "Some people in Iraq used to ask someone about a verse. When he recited it, they would say: I disbelieve in this (reading). This became widespread among the people, and they differed about the Quran."

«بكير قال إن " ناسا كانوا بالعراق، يسأل أحدهم عن الآية فإذا قرأها قال: فإني أكفر بهذه، ففشا ذلك في الناس واختلفوا في القرآن"

Ibid., 99.

3. Ibn Sirin: "A man would recite [a verse], then someone would say to him: You have disbelieved in what you say. This was reported to Uthman, and it greatly alarmed him."

«محمد بن سيرين: " كان الرجل يقرأ حتى يقول الرجل لصاحبه: كفرت بما تقول، فرفع ذلك إلى عثمان بن عفان فتعاظم ذلك في نفسه"

Ibid., 104.

4. Anas ibn Malik: "They differed about the Quran in the time of Uthman, so much so that boys and their teachers ended up fighting (*iqtatala*) one another."

"أنس بن مالك: " اختلفوا في القرآن على عهد عثمان حتى اقتتل الغلمان والمعلمون

Al-Tahawi, *Sharh Mushkil al-Athar* (Beirut, 1987), vol. 8, 132.

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